

Ascension Sunday
June 1, 2014
Hope Central Church
The Ascension of our Furnace Into Heaven.

Luke 24:36-53

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Jesus said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And having said this, Jesus showed them the hands and the feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, Jesus said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave Jesus a piece of broiled fish, and Jesus took it and ate in their presence.

Then Jesus said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to the Messiah's name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father-Mother promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, with uplifted hands, Jesus blessed them. While blessing them, Jesus withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Jesus, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

There's a thin line between anxiety and excitement. It's a psychological true, apparently. There's a thin line between anxiety and excitement.

It's that line we are always tending, it seems to me, when we are faced with transitions.

When I was a child, I thought when this gets settled, that that is done, when I'm old enough to choose my own clothes, when I am an adult, when I'm able to drive, when I leave my parent's house, when I get to college, when I fall in love, when I get my dream job, when my bills are paid, when I've saved enough for retirement, when I finally face my fears, when I no longer have to keep secrets, when I get emotionally sober, when I'm well, when things get settled, then I'll be OK.

There's a thin line between anxiety and excitement.

When I was a kid, I wanted some agency, some control over what was uncontrollable - the world of adults, the world of scholars, the world of the gay community, the intersections between queer community and straight community, the worlds of economic, class, race, gender inequity. I thought if I could control those worlds, then I would finally feel settled, I would be OK, feel mature, finally be a great partner to my beloved Meck, and a wonderful attentive endearing godmother to my godkids.

There is a thin line between anxiety and excitement.

Yes, you do know this for yourselves, thinking that things will get settled. But then the tornados come, the job is lost, misogyny continues its nefarious continuum from comments about women's bodies to the outright slaughter of women and people of color and trans people on subway cars, did you read about that in the paper this week? We get sick, and the car breaks down. These Romans continue to ride their horses through our communities reminding us to be very afraid for our very lives. Our mothers and fathers die, our children and our husbands die, and then our teacher Jesus dies. And we hold on, hold on, hold on to try to preserve what little we have and what we have accumulated and what we thought we knew against the unending tide of change.

There is a thin line between anxiety and excitement.

We hold on lest we forget the blessed memory, the facial expression, the very smell of the one we love. We hold on because it seems that holding on and managing what we have left has seemed to have protected us in the past. Then managing begins to replace being creative and being alive. Anxiety creeps in and gives us the rigid toxic energy to do the task of managing what little we believe we have, and so we embark on a ever smaller circles of living until all we have is anxiety.

There is a thin line between anxiety and excitement.

For thirty years they had Jesus. They had him in terrible times, but he taught them how to unwind that knot of anxiety through prayer, by teaching them not to worry about what tomorrow would bring, by learning to love their enemy instead of getting bolloxed up in hate and revenge. He taught them spiritual practices that would help them with that thin line between anxiety and excitement.

Even in his resurrection, he taught Mary, his beloved, not to cling to him, but to release him and let him go.

It is so that we must grieve what it is no longer. Elizabeth Kubler Ross gave us the five stages of grief:

1. denial and isolation,
2. anger,
3. bargaining,
4. depression, and
5. acceptance

– not prescriptions, but descriptions of the steps we move back and for the between in the messy business of grief. I'm not asking us to just get over what must be grieved, for that is the way of the world to ask us to pave over our sweet tender humanity.

But if you heard our scripture this morning, then perhaps you heard a sixth stage, and that is joy. There is something about the release of what is no more, that can not only help us mind the thin line between anxiety and excitement, it can actually, when the help of spiritual practices - prayer, singing, writing, walking, loving, feeding, generosity, creativity, can release us in to joy.

Our scripture this morning says that even though the disciples were doubting and questioning - just like us here at Hope Central – the disciples were joyful. And after Jesus left, after he was taken up into heaven, making way for the spirit to come to comfort and to guide, as they came away from the place of ascension, that place of release, they came away with joy.

This is the spiritual work, when the grief is done, to release, as we can, what no longer works, what is no longer here.

This is our work, to not keep the transitions from happening for that is a fool's task, but to know that the work of transitioning is the field of our spiritual work.

We can hold on to what was, and is no more, but that is anxiety's way.

We can together, work upon the practice field of change with excitement, and if we can remember to pray and sing, to love and work together, we can do so with excitement, even if we don't know what will happen because we have grounded ourselves in spirit practice, in touching again and again the center of the divine, the result of which is joy.

Tomorrow, we begin the exciting release of our furnace, our heating system. I want to tell you that this church in the bodies of the members of those who came from Central Congregational Church, they have been suffering with the anxiety of this old heating system. For more than 20 years, and maybe even for a span of years equal to the life of Jesus, they have endured cold Sunday mornings, paid thousands of dollars and spend millions of collective hours worrying about how to fix, and to repair, how to pay for a heating system that has not worked. Today, we are beginning to release what has kept us anxious and tired, and broke, and today we are freeing ourselves from what we know was broken to something we

pray will work - an heating system that is as ecologically sound as we can afford, a system that will turn our house from a house of worry to a house of praise, a center of hospitality, a place from which the work of the repair of the world can continue and go forward. We don't know how it will go, though we have made exquisite and elaborate plans. There may be chaos. We might have to worship among rubble. It might be there will be snafus, but it's all right because we know there is a thin line between anxiety and excitement and through our spiritual practice, we will remember this, that in releasing what is no more, and relying on God, joy will be ours.

I wanted to offer a gift of song, a specific act of spiritual practice for our congregation specifically for this time of ascension, of release, on the eve of this amazing project, this opportunity to explore the spiritual field of change and transition, this song. It's a niggun, a song from Jewish tradition, from Eastern Europe. You can find it in your bulletin.

God bring me deep, bring me deep, bring me deep,
God bring me deep, bring me deeper.

God bring me high, bring me high, bring me high,
God bring me high, bring me higher.

I'll sing it for you, and you can join in as you feel led. And after we sing this niggun, we will sing our middle hymn.